WASHINGTON HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING BOARD

March 2008

Bachelor of Arts in Technical Communication
Eastern Washington University

Introduction

Eastern Washington University (EWU) seeks approval to offer a Bachelor of Arts in Technical Communication degree through the Department of English. If approved, this interdisciplinary program would serve part- and full-time students at the Cheney Campus, enrolling 8 FTE students beginning fall 2008 and growing to 32 FTE students by 2012. The proposed program would replace an existing technical communication option within the traditional English degree and would complement an existing minor. It would prepare students for a broad range of communication careers in fields such as computing, engineering, health care, law, economics, and government. Moreover, it would prepare students for graduate studies in programs such as professional writing, rhetoric, composition, and communication.

Relationship to Institutional Role and Mission and the Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education

According to its mission statement, EWU's mission to be a "student-centered, regionally engaged university" would best be fulfilled through an academic experience that is integrated and interdependent. The proposed program would support EWU's mission by integrating skills and knowledge from the departments of English, Engineering and Design, Journalism, and Communication in a way that connects the liberal arts to professional preparation.

In addition, the proposed program would support the *Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education* by expanding postsecondary degree access to a field with broad economic applicability.

Diversity

To supplement the services available through EWU's campus-wide diversity initiative, program planners would develop recruitment and retention strategies responsive to the specific needs and barriers of minority groups, including the following:

- Developing outreach and awareness campaign programs directed to middle and high school classes, career and college fairs, as well as non-traditional sources such as community, professional, and social groups;
- Focusing efforts on transfer students from community and technical colleges, since a significant number of minority students attend two-year institutions;
- Developing brochures, fact sheets, and other promotional materials that represent and appeal to diverse student populations;
- Developing the program's Web-based materials to address the concerns and interests of diverse applicants;
- Developing relationships (via service learning and community-based projects) with community organizations that support and serve traditionally underserved populations;
- Tracking student progress in order to better assist students as they move through the program;
- Providing more one-to-one interaction and advising;
- Developing more social opportunities for students so they feel more connected and develop a stronger sense of belonging; and
- Developing peer-mentoring programs.

Program Need

According to the Higher Education Coordinating Board's (HECB) *State and Regional Needs Assessment Report*, a large percentage of students stay within their home region to attend college. Although the University of Washington currently offers a BS in Technical Communication, no four-year university east of the Cascades offers a baccalaureate degree in technical communication. Thus, the proposed program would respond to student needs by providing access to a baccalaureate degree in technical communication in Eastern Washington. Current enrollment of 22 students in the existing technical communication option provides some evidence of student interest in the subject. The proposed degree would meet the needs of local students who desire a more comprehensive technical communication program, yet wish to remain in the region while earning their degree.

In addition to suggesting student need for the proposed program, the *State and Regional Needs Assessment Report* has implications regarding community need, noting that Spokane County's economy is shifting its focus from extraction-based industry to technology-based industry. To the extent that technology-based industries rely on technical communication, growth in such industries would produce a corresponding increase in demand for applicants with technical communication skills.

Furthermore, the *State and Regional Needs Assessment Report* has implications regarding employer need for the proposed program, noting that, with the exception of government, Spokane County does not have a dominant employer. Rather, the area depends on many small businesses, with nearly 57 percent of firms employing just 1-4 people. The proposed BA degree would tend to serve local employers better than a BS degree, because with its stronger liberal arts foundation, the BA degree would better equip graduates with the diversity of skills needed for working as a technical writer in a small business environment. In other words, the local/regional employer base does not call for the level of specialization inherent in a BS degree.

Other sources suggest statewide employer need for the program as well. The Employment Security Department (ESD) predicts a 27.1 to 33.3 percent employment increase for technical writers in the state over the next 7 to 10 years. According to ESD's labor market and economic analysis Web site, the technical writer occupation is one of the top occupations statewide in terms of growth and projected demand, with between 202 and 235 openings each year between 2002 and 2012[1].

At the national level, the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL's) *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2006-07 Edition* states that "demand for technical writers and writers with expertise in areas such as law, medicine, or economics is expected to increase because of the continuing expansion of scientific and technical information and the need to communicate it to others. . . Rapid growth and change in the high-technology and electronics industries result in a greater need for people to write users' guides, instruction manuals, and training materials." The *State and Regional Needs Assessment Report* indicates that this is relevant locally as well, by noting projected growth in health care, engineering, and computing industries in the Spokane area.

The proposed program would not only respond to employer needs for writing skills, but also develop graduates' communication, teamwork, computer, and problem-solving skills. Consequently, it would respond to employer needs noted by the Workforce Education and Training Coordinating Board's (WTECB) report, *What Employers Need*, which indicates that 20 percent of employers reported difficulty finding qualified applicants with problem-solving, communication, and teamwork skills; and 12 percent of employers reported having difficulty finding qualified applicants with writing and computer skills.

Program Description

The proposed program transitions an existing option into a major that would feature a problem-based learning approach to instruction, supplemented by an internship requirement and senior capstone course. It would integrate existing courses from the departments of English, Engineering and Design, Journalism, and Communication to combine education in a wide variety of communication skills with specific technology skills. Through service learning and internships, students would develop important job related skills, learn civic responsibility and how to contribute to the good of the community. Students also would learn hands-on communication problem solving skills including generating, locating, gathering, assessing, and effectively communicating information through a variety of media.

To be eligible for admission to the program, students must have completed five credits each in introductory fiction and poetry courses. In addition, students either must have satisfied EWU's computer literacy, English composition, and mathematics competency requirements (21-25 credits) and completed 40 credits of core requirements; or have completed a direct-transfer associate degree from a recognized community college[2].

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[1] Wallace, D. (7/29/2004). "Technical Writers Write Their Own Career Ticket." *Workforce Explorer Washington*. Labor Market and Economic Analysis: Washington State Employment Security Department. [on-line] Available: http://www.workforceexplorer.com/article.asp?ARTICLEID=2975

[2] EWU's transfer agreements already include the technical communication option. Students with a direct-transfer associate degree would be considered "major-ready" for the new technical communication major.

To complete the program, students would take 90-100 credit hours of coursework, including 50-60 English credits, 12 journalism credits, 24 technology course credits, and 4 communication studies credits. They would also have to complete one year of a foreign language, unless they had already completed two years of a foreign language in high school. The total number of credits required to complete the degree and EWU's general education requirements would range from 161 to 180, depending on whether or not the student needed college coursework to meet the language requirement.

By completing the requirements for the proposed program, students would learn to:

- Analyze communication problems and propose effective and ethical solutions by clearly identifying and describing the problem and its context, the stakeholders and audiences involved, and the possible outcomes and consequences of proposed solutions;
- Plan and manage team projects by identifying tasks, creating a timeline for task completion, assigning tasks to individuals, and reporting plan and progress to supervisor/client;
- Conduct productive research by determining scope of inquiry, identifying credible and useful sources, collecting and assessing data, and arranging data into logical and considerate structures;
- Write, design, and edit a variety of professional documents, both print and electronic, using the principles of information design to create useable documents that address audiences' information and organizational needs, and engage users in appropriate action;
- Proficiently use a variety of standard technologies to locate, create, design, present, and edit information; and
- Copyedit and proofread quantitative and technical information, reference citations, illustrations, and tables using the established symbols and conventions, style sheets, and correct grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and spelling.

These student-learning outcomes would be measured using a variety of assessment tools including problem and service learning-based projects, community partner feedback, team evaluations, internship performance midterm and final evaluations, and capstone professional portfolios. Students would be assessed within their individual courses, based on learning outcomes identified for those courses. Learning outcomes for each course have been clearly defined and aligned with the program goals stated above.

The proposed program would be assessed in a variety of ongoing ways including: analysis of information in a database created to manage data from evaluation rubrics to measure student learning in technical communication courses; surveys of community partners and project clients to measure satisfaction with student performance and professionalism; mid-term and final evaluations from internship employers to assess whether students' knowledge and skills match employer needs; formalized review of student portfolios to assess preparation and career readiness; and course evaluations to assess student satisfaction with content and pedagogical approach. In addition, the proposed program would conduct entry surveys to determine student expectations for the program and exit surveys to assess student satisfaction with the program, determine the degree to which program met student expectations, and identify future plans and job prospects. The exit surveys would be followed up by graduate surveys to assess employment and career impact.

Program Costs

The proposed program would enroll 8 FTE students in the first year, growing to 32 FTE students by the fifth year. To implement the program, the Department of English has budgeted .16 FTE for administrative staff and 1.61 FTE for faculty, which includes .75 FTE for faculty yet to be hired. Core courses would be taught by full-time tenure track faculty. The proposed program would use existing office space and library resources, so the budget excludes those items. It would be state-funded, via internal reallocation, with limited impact on other departments or programs.

With an entering class of 8 FTE, the total budget for the first year of the proposed program would be $151,582, or $18,948 per FTE. At full enrollment of 32 FTE in the fourth year, the total budget would be $165,400, or $5,169 per FTE. This compares favorably with the average cost per FTE for students majoring in arts & letters at most other public institutions. According to the HECB's *2005-06 Education Cost Study (July 2007*), the direct cost per average annual upper division undergraduate arts & letters student FTE ranged from $4,725 for The Evergreen State College to $7,278 for the University of Washington, and EWU was $4,862.

External Review

Six external reviewers reviewed the program: Dr. Judith Ramey, Chair, Technical Communications, University of Washington; Dr. Lu Rehling, Director, Technical and Professional Writing Program, San Francisco State University; Dr. Molly K. Johnson, Assistant Professor, Professional Writing and Technical Communication, University of Houston-Downtown; Dr. Carroll Ferguson Nardone, Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Professional Communication, Sam Houston State University; Dr. Kristin Pickering, Director of the Professional Communication Program, Tennessee Tech University; and Dr. David Alan Sapp, Director, Program in Professional Writing, Fairfield University.

All six reviewers were quite supportive of the proposal, finding far more strengths than concerns. Although each reviewer had a different perspective, some common themes ran through the strengths they noted. In general, they found that the faculty were highly qualified and the program was well designed. Furthermore, they appreciated the proposed program's rigorous curriculum, commending its strong interdisciplinary and service learning components. Finally, they found that the program's assessment plans were exceptionally strong.

In contrast to program strengths, reviewer concerns and recommendations tended to be unique to each reviewer, rather than exhibiting common themes. Some reviewers made curriculum recommendations, such as offering a distinct course on usability, focusing more on the rhetorical nature of writing. Program planners responded that usability and rhetoric were integrated into courses in the proposed curriculum. One reviewer felt that the program's focus on public relations-related courses may be too strong, and program planners responded that the public relations focus was intended to address employer demands in the region. Another reviewer recommended requiring a second foreign language, and program planners responded that a majority of students would wish to remain in the region, and a second foreign language would not only be unnecessary but also may be prohibitive to student retention.

Other reviewer recommendations focused on resources. One reviewer recommended developing a dedicated lab for the program, and program planners responded that this would require further feasibility research and that there may be other ways to increase digital access. Other reviewers raised issues of faculty salaries and workloads; and program planners responded that salaries were determined by a collective bargaining agreement, they were trying to ensure efficient use of resources, and they believed proposed staffing levels were sufficient.

Staff Analysis

The proposed program would support the *Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education* by expanding postsecondary degree access to a field with broad economic applicability. In addition, the proposed program would support EWU's role and mission by providing students with an integrated academic experience that connects liberal arts to professional preparation. This experience would be enriched through EWU's campus-wide diversity initiative and the proposed program's diversity plan, which includes specific efforts to recruit and retain diverse students.

In addition, the proposed program would respond to student need by providing students in the region with their first opportunity to obtain a baccalaureate degree in the subject at a state university that is not as far from home as the University of Washington. Since the program's graduates would have skills valuable during the region's shift from an extraction-based to a technology-based economy, the program would respond to community need too. Furthermore, these graduates would be equipped to work in a field for which ESD and DOL reports indicate growing employer demand.

Program graduates would benefit from the program's rigorous curriculum, as well as from practical experience gained through its service learning component. Both of these program features were noted by reviewers. Core courses would be taught by full-time tenure track faculty whose current members were recognized by reviewers as being highly qualified. Program planners presented compelling evidence that learning outcomes for each course would be clearly defined and aligned with program goals. Reviewers were impressed by the program's thorough and multifaceted assessment approaches.

Based on the observations above, HECB staff concludes that the program would clearly be of high quality. In addition, demand for the program is well documented, and it is clear that the proposed program would not unnecessarily duplicate existing programs. Finally, HECB cost study data indicate that the program would be offered at a reasonable cost.

Staff Recommendation

After careful review of the proposal and supporting materials, staff recommends approval of the Bachelor of Arts Technical Communication at Eastern Washington University. The HECB Education Committee discussed the proposal during its March 3, 2008 meeting and recommended approval by the full Board.

RESOLUTION 08-04

WHEREAS, Eastern Washington University proposes to offer a Bachelor of Arts in Technical Communication; and

WHEREAS, The program would support the unique role and mission of the institution by providing students with an integrated academic experience that connects liberal arts to professional preparation; and

WHEREAS, The program would respond to student, employer and community need by expanding access in the Spokane region to a baccalaureate degree in a field pertinent to the region's shift from an extraction-based to a technology-based economy; and

WHEREAS, The program's graduates would benefit from the program's rigorous curriculum, as well as from practical experience gained through its service learning component; and

WHEREAS, The program features thorough and multifaceted assessment approaches; and

WHEREAS, The program has strong support from external reviewers; and

WHEREAS, The program's cost would be reasonable;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Higher Education Coordinating Board approves the Bachelor of Arts in Technical Communication at Eastern Washington University, effective March 19, 2008.

Adopted:

March 19, 2008

Attest:

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Bill Grinstein, Chair

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Roberta Greene, Secretary